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REFLECTIONS OF AN ACTRESS.

BY CLARA MORRIS.

IN THE morning at rehearsal an actor is like a caterpillar, plain to look upon, nibbling this leaf or that, moving slowly, laboriously, from point to point ; in the afternoon, having withdrawn from the world, for rest, for thought, he is a chrysalis ; while at night he flutters forth a many-tinted, broad-winged butterfly.

Yet the public are not content to watch the pretty flitting of this handsome fellow from one glowing blossom to another ; they want to know upon what leaves he fed as a caterpillar, and, above all, what did he do, what did he think, while shut up *en chrysalide*.

Formerly, when theatres were few and the plays were of ancient date, with the scenes laid in foreign countries, when actors trailed about in ermine and glittered in jewels the size of pigeons' eggs, there was a certain mystery about stage people. The men stalked about in solemn silence ; the women were discreetly veiled. If the beautiful young heroine of the play was the mother of a brood of little ones, no one knew it. If the arch-traitor and villain, who simply waded in gore at night, was but a kindly old body, fond of giving pennies to babies, no one knew it. But in these days of numerous theatres and of modern plays: in which actors wear the clothes of to-day,—above all, since the interviewer has been loose in the land,—the heart of our mystery has been plucked out. We are simply a body of every-day men and women who go about their business in a most business-like way.

But as there are children who are only happy with a toy while they are on a still hunt for the "squeak," so there are people who have torn their toy—the theatre—so far apart as to lay bare all its machinery,—its traps, rain-box, thunder-sheet, paper-snow machine, practical moon, etc., and yet they are not contented :

now they turn their attention to "the squeak." Understanding perfectly the construction of that beautiful canvas and paint garden basking in the electric sunlight, they want now to know just how the butterfly got out of that dry shell, and how, oh, how, did he get his wings.

I am no butterfly—I lack the delicate marking, the softly-brilliant coloring. I am but a moth, a big, blundering good-natured moth, strong of wing and square of head, stumbling into a flower now and then. Yet, because I too have been a chrysalis, I too arouse curiosity.

But, jesting aside, I am going to try to answer two or three of the questions that are oftenest asked about my profession: it would be impossible to answer all of them. Here is number one:

"What qualities are absolutely necessary in a man or woman for the making of a successful actor?"

Ye who ask this question may be wise as serpents, but I dare not declare ye harmless as doves. It is too like a hand-grenade—quite harmless to the one who flings it, but apt to be a trifle confusing to the party who receives it. I have heard the question answered in various ways: one declared for a fine physique, another for a great voice, a quick memory, etc.; but for myself, I shall adopt the Yankee habit, and answer one question by asking another.

What professional actor or actress can equal the performance of little children playing at making calls? What animated and dramatic conversation they will hold with men and women impersonated by their fancy alone? What grace, what sincerity, what abandon? This can only be accounted for in one way: a versatile imagination is the chief faculty of children; not having realized a self-conscious being, they have no difficulty in passing into that of others. Therefore I claim that imagination is the chief quality required in the making of an actor; quick, volatile sympathies, open to external impressions. Imitative power all actors possess, and that brings me to the difference between the old school and the new,—the Kemble and the Irving. The first imitated; he followed in the beaten track; he was coldly careful, precise in gesture and tone; he respectfully copied every particle of the business of his predecessors in a play; he imitated, and, what is worse, he imitated another actor. Whom does Irving imitate? The man has neither the Kemble beauty nor the Kemble

voice, but, good heavens ! what strength of imagination ! And this is backed by great energy ; he is a man of affairs, keen and shrewd, a good business man ; but it is his imagination that makes a brilliant actor of him, not his shrewdness.

To the new school belongs Joseph Jefferson, of whom I always think as the poet-actor. With perceptions so delicate, sympathies so keen, enthusiasm so youthful, judgment so mature, a heart so tender, and a mind so cultivated, where are we to find his equal ? An actor's proudest privilege is to add something to the character the author has drawn ; and we all know that out of the plenitude of his own gentleness Joseph Jefferson has humanized and made lovable the village sot drawn by Washington Irving.

I am not claiming that imagination alone will make an actor. He must have observation as well. Let him keep his eyes open and study his fellow-men. People of different temperaments will express anger in different ways. It does not take a vast experience of life or a very close observation to discover the difference between the slow, painful tears of old age and the plenteous, passionate overflow from the eyes of youth. Was there ever a gesture that could excel, in meaning and effect, the one used by Salvini in "*Morte Civile*" when the escaped convict shambles slowly forward and, stretching out his arm timidly, lays his fingertips on the priest's hand, then quickly withdraws them, and with unutterable intensity presses them to his own lips ? The salutation was given with such trembling, wistful deprecation as brought tears to many eyes. When I questioned Signor Salvini about it, he said : "No, I have no invent. In my country, among the poor, down-trodden peasants, you will often see that kiss : they love, but also they fear, the priest—si—si !" This beautiful gesture, then, was the result of observation.

When, some years ago, I found myself cast for the part of *Cora*, in the play "*Article 47*," and learned that there was a mad scene for me to act, I was alarmed. The traditional stage maniac was a combination of rolling eyes, snorty starts, and noisy declamation, sometimes ridiculous and always a bore. Therefore tradition could not help me. When Mr. Daly, with unintentional cruelty, took me aside and informed me that everything depended on just one act,—that, to quote his exact words, "the play must stand or fall by the mad scene,"—I nearly fell there and then from the fright he gave me. The following nightmare fortnight I shall

never forget. Having learned the lines or words of my part and settled the question of the showily-rich costumes to be worn, every moment of my time was given to the study of the character Mr. Daly had intrusted to me to develop and place before his public. I regarded *Cora* as a beautiful, uneducated, half-tamed animal, a possible victim to hysteria, from the first : it was from this stand-point I made my study. But when all was done, I felt, to my dismay, a degree of uncertainty. With an anxiously exacting manager behind me and a coolly critical audience before me, to enter upon so important a task in a doubtful frame of mind was simply to court failure. For once I dared not trust to my imagination, to my sympathy. I felt I must have facts to support me, and, like the famous hook-handed captain, I must "take an observation." I then made a pilgrimage to the insane asylum on Blackwell's Island, but while there it suddenly dawned upon me that it would be a cruel and heartless act to single out for study some individual unfortunate, upon whom the hand of God was resting so heavily, and then to imitate her before a crowd of people. It would be like taking advantage of a crippled child. I felt it would be kinder and perhaps more artistic to choose two or three symptoms common to all cases of insanity, and then, by carefully presenting these general symptoms to the audience, suggest the insanity of *Cora*.

With that thought in my mind, while all the woman in me bent the head before such an aggregation of human misery, while every nerve shuddered away from the frightful sights and sounds, the actress made note of gibbering laugh, swaying body, and broken, incoherent speech. Ah me, it was dreadful! I was observing with a vengeance. Still, I had found my facts. They made a sure foundation on which to place the superstructure of imagination. I had suffered greatly from terror, hard work, and sleeplessness, but I was amply repaid ; for after the first performance, not only the generous public, but my gratified manager and the very critics themselves, gave me words of praise for the work I had done, the character I had created.

It is not always easy to make one's observations. I remember that on one occasion I experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining the subject I wished to study. It was at the time that Messrs. Shook and Palmer were about to produce "*Miss Multon*" at the Union Square Theatre. *Miss Multon* dies, but there is in the

whole play no word which indicates the nature of the disease which causes her death.

After due consultation the powers who were decided that the lady should die of heart-disease ; a very simple matter so far as the powers were concerned, but a very difficult matter to me, who had the part to play. I knew absolutely nothing of heart-disease, nor could I find a single friend or acquaintance who could assist me. I turned to the doctor under whose care I then was, and asked his help. After some conversation he decided that *angina pectoris* was what I was looking for, as it seemed to adapt itself perfectly to the requirements of the character I described to him. He began by telling me something of the structure of the heart. He showed me some ugly pictures, too, that looked, to my eyes, like sections of ripe tomatoes with blue radishes growing through them. He taught me where my heart was located, and informed me that, in the ordinary stage gesture, when the hand seeks the heart, the aforesaid hand is something like a foot away from the sought-for organ. He minutely and repeatedly described to me the attitude and expression of one enduring, in speechless, almost breathless, agony, that awful torture called by doctors *angina pectoris*. This was to be used for the climax of the play. So far we had gone smoothly enough, but suddenly, to use a theatrical expression, the doctor "stuck." He declared his utter inability to convey to me an idea of the manner in which a patient breathes when suffering from excitement or fatigue. That was unfortunate, for it was on that symptom I most relied to indicate to the audience what was *Miss Multon's* physical condition, her eloquent language making plain her domestic woes. I begged the doctor to show me how I should breathe, but he shook his head and said, "No, no ! you must see a subject." At his next visit I saw he was vexed, and pretty soon he informed me that the only heart subject he had found was a man bearded to the eyes ; but, said he, while he savagely buttoned his coat : "I'll find you a subject, or that man's beard shall come off, for you must see that movement of nostril and mouth."

Not more than two hours after, there was a violent ring at the bell, and, glancing from the window and seeing the doctor's carriage, I hurried to the hall, and, looking down, saw a very cruel thing. The doctor and a woman were standing at the foot of the long, long staircase. Then he caught her by the arm, and, start-

ing by her side, ran her up the whole long flight of stairs. Shall I ever forget that woman's face as she stood swaying, clinging to the door frame ! her ghastly, waxen pallor ; the strained, scared look in her eyes ; the dilating nostrils ; above all, the movement of the muscles about the mouth, which contracted the upper lip at every hurtling, gasping breath ! The doctor pushed by her and hastily whispered : " You are a student and not well enough to attend—" I don't know whether he said class or lecture ; I was only sure of the word student. So, burning with shame, I took my cue, and going forward I felt her pulse and asked her a few appropriate questions. We were alone then for a few moments, and she told me her pitifully commonplace little story. I questioned her closely as to how anger or surprise affected her, and, finding she was very poor and had a child to care for, I slipped a bill into her hand as she rose to go. She was thanking me quietly when her eyes fell upon the figure on the bill. Instantly over her neck, her face, her ears, there flamed a color so fiercely, hotly red it seemed to scorch the skin. Her very wrists, where they were bared above her gloves, were red. Her hand flew to her side in the very gesture the doctor had been teaching me. She gave a little laugh, and nervously remarked : " I—I feel so—hot and—prickly. I suppose—I'm all red ! You see—it was—the surprise—that did it ! Don't look so—frightened, Miss. I haven't no pain. I ain't red neither, am I, now ? " Heaven knows she was not. Her very lips were white. So, with thanks and pallid smiles, the poor soul removed herself and her fell disease from my presence, and I had received my second painful object-lesson.

The night before the production of the play, in a spirit of mischief I drew up a document for the doctor to sign, in which he acknowledged that in my study of heart-disease he had been my teacher. For, said I, should the critics attack that part of my work, you will then have to share the blame. Laughingly I brought forth my document ; laughingly he signed it. The critics did not attack, but I still keep the acknowledgment, and it bears the signature " E. C. Seguin."

I am not arguing that to be a good *Lady Macbeth* one should first commit a murder or look on while murder is committed ; for, like many another character it can only be well acted when it is well known, and it can only be known through the imaginative sympathies.

In a word, then, I believe that of the many qualities required for the making of a fine actor the most important are imagination, observation, and a nice judgment in adapting one's knowledge to the requirements of the stage.

The question next oftenest asked is : " What attraction has the stage for its followers, that they are so devoted to it ? " Yes, we are devoted to it. We respect its antiquity ; we admire the position it has gained in the world of art ; we are grateful to it for our daily bread.

One of its attractions is that it may prove a short cut to popularity. Then, people of other callings transact their business amid more or less dull surroundings and turn to their homes for that which the actor finds at the theatre alone, namely, light, warmth, music, sociability. For my part, I do not believe in a " mute, inglorious Milton." I think that all power demands expression, and the employment of power is a delight. The actor who succeeds feels he pleases his public, and therein finds his own pleasure. When triumph comes to him, it is in so delightful a guise he cannot help being moved by it. When an author places his book before the public, he must wait ; he learns gradually of his success. Not so the actor. His work receives instant recognition in swift, soul-satisfying applause ; and what a delicious draught it is ! It produces a sort of divine intoxication, that, having once experienced, one longs to repeat.

It is curious how a performer and an audience act and react upon one another. Sometimes an actor begins his work in the highest spirits, and the coldness, the unresponsiveness, of the audience completely crush him. He feels thrown back upon himself, and for the rest of the play, however painstaking he may be, he will lack naturalness and spirit. Again, an actor goes to his task in sickness, trouble, or sorrow, quite unfit for his work, but his audience gives him a warm greeting ; his heart responds instantly, his spirits rise, he decides he must do his best to please these generous people ; so in trying to divert them he diverts himself, and all goes well.

Through these agencies I can in a scene of anger reach the very verge of frenzy. When, after enduring through a play every conceivable humiliation any human creature can bring upon another, I am at last brought face to face with my triumphant foe, by forcing my mind to dwell on all the cruel

wrongs thrust upon me by this individual I work myself into a state of suppressed rage that sensibly increases the beating of my heart and makes me burn all over. If my first accusing, indignant speech is followed by a sharp round of applause, the effect upon me is that of a lash from a whip to an angry horse. The blood thunders in my ears, my body vibrates under the blows of my heart ; and between great earth and greater heaven I see but one face, that of my enemy, and it gleams white through a mist of red. I have forgotten that he is Mr. X. and I Miss M. Should the exigencies of the play then demand from him a sneering or contemptuous answer to my last speech, my muscles become rigid, I am held, possessed, tormented by one intense desire—to close my hands about his throat and clench, and clench, until I may stand in that red mist alone. I am neither actress nor woman, but for just that one hot, furious moment I am *murder*. So, between the imagination and the excitement of applause, the deed is done. I forget myself, and pass into another form of being.

But my time and the space of THE REVIEW is exhausted, and the remainder of the questions, such as the temptations, frights, drolleries, of the stage, must wait.

CLARA MORRIS.